

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 418

EA 016 390

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TITLE Curriculum: The Board's Role.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Washington, DC.
Educational Policies Service.
PUB DATE Jan 84
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides -
Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v15 n1 p1-3 Jan
1984
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Education; *Board of Education Policy;
*Board of Education Role; *Community Control; Court
Litigation; *Curriculum; Dress Codes; Elementary
Secondary Education; Legal Responsibility;
Principals; Required Courses; *School District
Autonomy; *State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Illinois; Michigan; Minnesota; Ohio

ABSTRACT

As a result of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report and other recent studies, an increasing number of governors and state legislators have sought to establish new requirements and minimum standards statewide. Addressing the potential threat that these requirements represent to local school boards in their efforts to maintain control over curriculum policies, this issue's lead article emphasizes the board's responsibility to keep as much control as possible by reviewing its own policies, clarifying its goals and practices, keeping informed, developing new courses, establishing an ongoing evaluation, ensuring effective policy implementation, and informing state regulators of the particular needs of the local community. (JBM)

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A component of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA Direct Affiliates and EPS subscribers

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Curriculum: the board's role

by Brenda Z. Greene

Perhaps more than ever the role of the local school board in determining curriculum—what is taught—is unclear. Education is in the national limelight as a result of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report and more than a dozen other studies. More math, more science, increased competency in basic language skills and social studies, computer study for all, a renewed emphasis on foreign language study—and fewer “Mickey Mouse” courses—apparently make up the national consensus for what should be taught (and not taught) in schools.

At the same time, and often as a result of these recent studies, governors and state legislatures are directing state boards of education to establish more rigorous statewide “minimum” standards. Colleges and universities also are being lobbied to raise entrance requirements, both to enhance their own standards and to force a trickle down effect of increased academic emphasis and preparation in high schools. These new requirements are layered upon existing federal mandates for meeting special student needs.

What is left for a local school board to do? Is local control of curriculum eroding?

Board responsibility

No matter what obstacles are put in its way, your board is responsible and accountable for the educational program. The board must ensure that the program meets diverse student needs, community expectations, as well as enacted requirements.

Although minimum curriculum standards are mandated in most states, local school systems must provide an educational program that reflects

community needs and desires. If more rigorous academic standards are being imposed, local boards must develop strategies for implementing those standards that won't conflict with goals important to the community. For example, increased academic emphasis may result in increased high school dropouts and fewer art and music classes. If lowering the dropout rate and offering a diverse curriculum are local priorities, board decisions must be made about emphasis and enrichment beyond the minimum requirements. And these decisions must be made according to available funding.

Your budget decisions probably influence curriculum more than any others. Especially when funds are scarce, it is essential for board members to understand the full implications of their curriculum decisions. Instead of being a rubber stamp for staff recommendations, make sure those recommendations are based on adopted board policies and priorities before approving funding.

Review your policies

To guide board decisions make sure your policies on instruction are current, clear, and comprehensive. It is those policies that will provide overall direction for your staff and for board decisions. Your policies should define your instructional beliefs, your expectations, and your priorities. Section I of the EPS coding system includes those policies that relate to the instructional program: goals; basic program; special programs; activities programs; instructional arrangements and resources; guidance; testing; and academic achievement.

Your policy on the basic instructional program, for example, should

identify the components of the curriculum that are considered basic by the board. It could define the total program, or divide it by educational level (elementary, intermediate, high school). You may want to give particular emphasis to some programs such as health, citizenship, and family life education. In those cases, separate policies should be adopted.

To be effective guidelines your policies need to be current. Regular review and revision is essential. Your policies should reflect changing mandates as well as changing community needs and desires. If two years of foreign language is a new graduation requirement, for example, that should be included in your policy on graduation requirements. But it also should be addressed in your policy on basic instructional program to provide guidance. What languages will be taught? Will more than two years of high school foreign language be available to interested students? Is the study of world cultures a part of the foreign language program? Is spoken fluency a goal of the program?

Clarify goals and priorities

Your goals and priorities should be reviewed regularly through a collaborative process involving staff and community. Some school systems rely on community and staff advisory committees to identify needs and recommend changes. Large systems also might want to draw on the expertise of special advisory committees, such as those for special, vocational, and gifted/talented education. Whatever process you use, be sure to get input from all segments of the community—administrators, teachers, students, parents, business leaders, college and

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university representatives—for a true reflection of community attitudes.

Because community attitudes and expectations change over time, you might consider conducting a public survey periodically. Ten years ago, for example, computer literacy was not an educational priority. The degree to which your community sees it as a priority today needs to be assessed.

Be informed

Advice serves no purpose if board members are not knowledgeable about what is and what might be. The June-July 1983 issue of *Updating* included an assessment tool, the "Educational Excellence Checklist," based on recommendations of the National Commission's report. The checklist's purpose was to help local educators, school board members, and community members to assess how their educational program measured up against the commission's recommendations—and if any changes should be made to meet those standards.

Was the checklist used in your community? Did you know if your school system met or didn't meet each recommendation? Or, did the superintendent have to provide answers for school board members?

If you could answer the questions on your own, you must be doing your homework. If not, use the checklist as a foundation for finding out more about your educational program. Find out what is and what isn't being taught—and why. Measure your program, not only against the commission's recommendations, but against your instructional goals and policies.

Talk to administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and visit your schools to find out more about the curriculum. Establish procedures for keeping the board informed about the effectiveness of the curriculum. Some school systems regularly schedule re-

ports by curriculum specialists or teachers at board meetings. This practice enables the public and the media to learn more about the educational program, too. Know what the objectives for each program are, and question whether those objectives are being met.

A board committee on instruction provides another opportunity for keeping the board informed about curriculum matters. In addition to keeping board members up-to-date on what is, the committee format also provides an informal working environment when new courses of study are being developed. Concerns can be raised and questions asked that may be useful to curriculum specialists as they refine a new program.

In addition to regular procedures for staying informed, it is a board member's responsibility to increase his or her knowledge independently. Read all you can about what other school systems are doing and what researchers are discovering. Attend conventions and seminars to broaden your knowledge. Ask if there are alternatives to the approaches used in your system, and if current research has implications for your system's practices and priorities.

Developing new courses

Identifying unmet needs and developing new curriculum or alternative methods is a continuing process. The professional staff has the expertise to develop curriculum and methods. But it is the board's responsibility to make sure that time and personnel are allocated for evaluating needs and developing new programs to meet those needs, and for preparing teachers to implement new programs.

The Warren Local School District (Vincent, Ohio), which serves approximately 2,700 K-12 students, has established a process for developing new courses of study. The Educational

Development Committee (EDC) is composed of appointees of the superintendent and the local teachers' association. One or more school board members also can serve on the committee; the board member serves as a point of contact for other board members in addition to the superintendent. The EDC creates academic study committees to write new courses of study for particular subjects or to update existing courses. The system's curriculum director serves as committee chairman, and the superintendent is an *ex officio* member.

"Some teachers have limited background in curriculum development," says Frederic H. Reeder, superintendent. "Rotating membership on the various committees gives more teachers a chance to develop curriculum skills." The EDC members meet after school hours on their own time. "Some systems pay stipends to staff members to work on curriculum development," adds Reeder. "Our people are committed to being involved in this process, and it works without additional funding."

Although most recommendations for new courses or revisions will come from staff members, you may find that recommendations also will be made by community members or individual board members. No matter where new programs are rooted, it is up to the board to make sure that all new programs support the system's instructional goals. Among the questions board members should ask are:

- Is the need for this program reflected in our instructional goals?
- Will this program be effective in meeting that need/goal?
- Will this program result in loss of an existing program due to time or funding constraints? Should it?
- Will this program serve most of our students or only a small number?
- Are there alternative ways to meet this need?
- Is our existing staff trained to implement this program?
- How will this program be evaluated to ensure that it effectively accomplishes its purpose?

Ongoing evaluation

What was effective five years ago, or even last year, may not be meeting your community's needs this year. In addition to keeping your instructional goals current, you need to make sure that your curriculum is continuing to

Updating School Board Policies is published eleven times annually and provided to every board member and the policy administrator of school districts that are members of the National School Boards Association's Direct Affiliate Program or subscribers to NSBA's Educational Policies Service. EPS Staff: Dale Gaddy, director, school district management services; Brenda Z. Greene, editor; Kevin Smith, production manager; Eve Shepard, clearinghouse manager.

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meet those goals. Through school board policy you can direct that an evaluation process be developed for each aspect of the curriculum. Include in that process effective monitoring and reporting to the board.

As the basis for its role in revising or developing courses of study, the Warren school system's EDC is charged with the ongoing study of the system's curriculum. A five-year study cycle was instituted in the 1979-80 school year. As necessary, new subject areas are added to the cycle. During the 1982-83 school year there were ten "course of study committees" ranging from art and music to specific learning disabilities. Based on the review of needs and current practice, the committees revise and rewrite curriculum and recommend new instructional materials necessary to support the program; staff inservice is recommended to train teachers when the new course of study and materials are adopted by the school board.

Community Consolidated District 102 (Prairie View, Ill.) uses a process called Educational Program Review Technique (E.P.R.T.) that measures the value of a program and its cost effectiveness. The results are program evaluation and fiscal information used by the board and administration in establishing instructional—and funding—priorities. The process includes setting program objectives and strategies for program delivery according to several expenditure levels, including the current level of spending. Also developed are evaluation instruments for each program ranging from test scores to student/parent surveys. As reported by Ronald F. Crates, the system's superintendent, in the July-August 1983 issue of the *Illinois School Board Journal*, evaluation is an essential component of the process.

Saying isn't doing

Your policies on curriculum development, adoption, and evaluation may be followed precisely. Nevertheless, unless your policies ensure effective implementation, you may be going through a futile exercise.

Your policy on hiring professional staff, for example, should direct the superintendent to develop a screening process to meet specific program needs. If the emphasis of your foreign language program is on spoken language, do your procedures identify how and by whom a candidate's abil-

ity to speak the language will be judged? Also, can your new writing curriculum be implemented effectively if your policy on class size will result in a teacher reading 150 12-page essays weekly? Administrators should point out these pitfalls to board members throughout the curriculum process. You may accept the limitations on the curriculum, or you may seek a solution through policy revision.

Speak out

What happens if new state mandates conflict with the instructional goals you develop locally? Most state regulators recognize that localities have unique needs and, therefore, limit mandates to minimum standards that will be acceptable statewide. And, before a potential conflict is established, you should be involved in the public review and comment process that takes place before laws are changed.

Make sure you have a policy that permits your board to take a stand on issues affecting public education. Then, be sure you follow through with the assistance of your system's administration. When new graduation requirements are proposed by your state board of education, for example, ask your superintendent to evaluate the proposal and report to you the implications for your educational program. If three years of math and science are proposed as a new requirement, will students have time during the existing day to study art and music? What courses may have to be dropped as a result of more science and math being taught? Will you have to develop additional math and science courses to enable those students with less math/science ability—and those not planning to attend college—to graduate? Will you be able to hire sufficient math and science teachers to handle the increased load?

Share your concerns with your state school boards association and be involved as it develops its legislative program and strategies. Let your community know what the implications of the new requirements are for their school system. Explain to community members how they can testify for or against recommendations.

If, despite your public efforts, the conflicting state mandates are adopted, you will have to find a way to meet the new requirements. If additional local funding is needed to continue meeting your established prior-

ities, the community will understand why. You will have demonstrated to your community your commitment to the special needs of your community and its young people. ■

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In the case, a first-year physical education teacher required his class to perform a "headspring over a rolled mat." A student sustained an injury that resulted in quadriplegic paralysis. Expert witnesses pointed out that gymnastics is a dangerous activity that requires carefully planned instruction; that a new teacher requires more careful supervision; and that a principal should consult with a new teacher regarding instructional plans. The teacher testified that the principal had not discussed the curriculum with him and did not require the teacher to submit lesson plans pertaining to the curriculum or methods. The jury found that the principal's administrative actions were unreasonable and that his failure to reasonably administer the curriculum and supervise the inexperienced teacher's work was a substantial cause of the accident.

Implications for change

These Michigan and Minnesota court decisions strongly suggest that principals should return to their traditional role as supervisor of the instructional program. Although these decisions set precedents only in their respective jurisdictions, the sound legal reasoning on which they are based likely will be used in other states. Because the ultimate responsibility for the quality of the instructional program and providing a safe learning environment rests with school boards and superintendents, they should be prepared for the implications of these decisions. Board members and superintendents should reassess the role of the principal in their school systems and develop policies and regulations that reinstate the principal as instructional leader.

Colleges and universities also should participate in this process of change. Curricula for graduate training of school administrators should be revised to emphasize the role of the principal as instructional supervisor. Moreover, school administrators must be encouraged to accept this responsibility and obtain the skills needed to function more effectively as instructional leaders. ■